



Bowel Habits and Constipation in Pēpi/Babies

Whānau/Family Information – Neonatal Services

Introduction

A bowel motion may be known as bowel action, excretion, number two, poo, stool and poop! It is also known by many other names. Early recognition and management of constipation is essential. However, knowing what is normal is necessary before discussing constipation.

Newborn pēpi

During the first few days of pēpi life the bowel action is sticky and dark green in colour (called meconium). This will then gradually change, lighten and become thinner. This is known as transitional stool.

Well pēpi

Generally speaking, the bowel action of every pēpi is different. If the pēpi is feeding well and gaining weight whānau/parents need not worry about the form, colour, frequency and smell of the bowel action. If the bowel motion is wet and soft it is not regarded as constipation.

In the first four to five months of life there may be two to four bowel actions each day. Some pēpi may have a bowel action after each feed, others once every two to four days.

Breastfed and breastmilk-fed pēpi

Breastfed and expressed milk-fed pēpi can pass a bowel motion with each feed or more. In some pēpi they may not pass a bowel motion for up to eight to ten days as all the milk is absorbed. If this occurs and pēpi is having frequent wet nappies, is settled between feeds and showing no signs of discomfort do not be alarmed. However, if you are concerned consult your health professional.

The bowel motion is usually yellow or green/yellow in colour. The texture is soft and glue like. The smell is slightly sour, 'milk sour' or odourless. It is normal to find white grains 'curds' in the bowel motion. They may vary greatly in colour, number and bulk as the diet of the mother affects the motion.

Formula-fed pēpi

If pēpi is formula fed, the motion will be firmer but similar in colour, shape and smell of the motion of a breastfed pēpi. It will be green/yellow, brownish/green/yellow or brown in colour, with the occasional curd in it. Iron may change the colour of the motion to be darker green. Casein (part of the milk formula) causes an unpleasant odour. Some fats contained in the formula (animal or vegetable) may cause foul smelling motions, indicating it is not well digested and absorbed.

Starting pēpi food

Solids are recommended not to be introduced until six months of age. Give pēpi natural fruit juices, fruit, vegetables and pēpi cereal foods as directed by your health professional. Food for young pēpi should be always mashed or pureed so that pēpi does not choke whilst eating. Bowel motions will change according to the different types of food given.

Constipation

Constipation is where the bowel motion is dry, hard, infrequent poo. It is a common problem in childhood, particularly around the time of starting solids, toilet training or if a child has had a painful or frightening bowel movement.

Sign and symptoms

- Hard and dry poo – can be pebble-like
- Pain and or crying when having a poo
- Bloated looking tummy
- Bright blood around poo or bottom due to tears in the skin around the anus (fissures)

If bleeding occurs contact your General Practitioner (GP) or Health Nurse/Midwife.

Why constipation occurs

In most cases of constipation in children, no serious cause is found. Factors that may contribute to constipation include fever, pain, dehydration, dietary and fluid intake, psychological issues, toilet training, medicines and family history of constipation.

During hot weather constipation can be caused by lack of fluid, as water is lost through sweat and wet nappies. Constipation can also be caused by incorrect preparation of formula – if extra or not enough scoops of formula have been added against the instruction of the manufacturer. Constipation can also occur when pēpi/baby is being weaned from the breast to formula feeds. Frequent changing of brands and type of formula can also be a cause.

Key points

- There are a lot of differences in the firmness and frequency of poo in pēpi.
- You only need to worry about the firmness and frequency of the poo if it seems to be causing a problem.
- Constipation can cause stomach cramps, reduced appetite and irritability.
- Prepare formula exactly as instructed and ensure it is correct for pēpi age. Remember the water must be added before powder.
- Breastfed pēpi do not normally need extra water and should only be offered after discussion with your health care professional. More frequent breastfeeds may be required in hot weather.
- Gentle abdominal massage or gentle movement of lower limbs in a bath may be helpful to encourage a bowel motion.

Health alert

If your pēpi is constipated and it is not related to any of the above reasons contact your General Practitioner or Health Nurse/Midwife immediately as there may be something else wrong.

